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ABSTRACT

International Literacy Year, 1990, is intended to alert readers to the persistence of illiteracy. The challenge of illiteracy can only be met by concerted action on the part of all those concerned, acting together to conquer ignorance, eliminate poverty, promote peace, and assert the solidarity and interdependence of nations and peoples. As early as 1946, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization began promotion of basic education. From 1960 to 1985, the rate of illiteracy among adults was reduced from 39.3 percent to 27.7 percent worldwide. This reduction was primarily due to the expanded enrollment of children in school rather than to any progress in the struggle against adult illiteracy. The absolute number of illiterate adults is steadily increasing, with the figures having risen from 740 million in 1970 to 889 million in 1985. Progress in schooling is offset by the effects of population growth. The average illiteracy rate conceals disparities between different regions of the world. Of the 889 million illiterate adults aged 15 and over, 98 percent are found in developing nations. Almost 63 percent of all illiterate adults are women. Of the 116 million children aged 6 to 11 who were unable to attend elementary school in 1985, 60 percent were girls. The struggle for literacy is also a struggle for justice, for access to knowledge, and for equality. Literacy is an essential precondition for the effective exercise of human rights. (CML)

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LITERACY LESSONS

CE 055 132

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Literacy, human rights and peace

by Ali Hamadache

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) came into existence in the aftermath of the Second World War, its purpose being to assist future generations to avoid perpetuating the forms of violence which had led to that war. As laid down in its Constitution, adopted in London on 16 November 1945, it was intended to 'contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms...'.

> *The Governments of the States Parties to this Constitution on behalf of their peoples declare:*
>
> - *That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed;*
> - *... That the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern...*
>
> (Extracts from the *Preamble to the Constitution of Unesco*)

Symbol of International Year of Peace, 1986

To realize this purpose, the Organization was more especially called on to 'give fresh impulse to popular education and to the spread of culture...' and to promote 'the ideal of equality of educational opportunity without regard to race, sex or any distinctions, economic or social.'

Thus, *education was recognized as a fundamental right of every individual*, as stipulated in 1948 by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in article 26.1. On numerous

occasions, the right to education has been reaffirmed by the international community through various international and regional conferences organized both by Unesco and by the United Nations, including the Fourth International Conference on Adult Education which introduced the concept of 'the right to learn'.

- *The right to learn is:*
  - *the right to read and write;*
  - *the right to question and analyse;*
  - *the right to imagine and create;*
  - *the right to read one's own world and to write history;*
  - *the right to have access to educational resources;*
  - *the right to develop individual and collective skills...*
- *The right to learn is an indispensable tool for the survival of humanity.*
- *If we want the peoples of the world to be self-sufficient in food production and other essential human needs, they must have the right to learn.*
- *If women and men are to enjoy better health, they must have the right to learn.*
- *If we are to avoid war, we must learn to live in peace, and learn to understand one another.*
- *'Learn' is the key word ...*
- *It is a fundamental human right whose legitimacy is universal...*

(Extracts from the *Declaration of the Fourth International Conference on Adult Education*, Paris, 19–29 March 1985).

WHAT IS THE POSITION AS REGARDS THE EFFECTIVE EXERCISE OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION?

The struggle against illiteracy certainly antedated the creation of Unesco, but, as early as the first session of its General Conference (1946), the Organization demonstrated its concern for literacy work, more especially through the promotion of basic education. Unesco's first Director-General, Julian Huxley, emphasized that '... where half the people of the world are denied the elementary freedom which consists in the ability to read and write, there lacks something of the basic unity

and basic justice which the United Nations are pledged together to further'; the struggle against illiteracy has ever since been a fundamental objective in the Organization's successive programmes.

The results of the struggle against illiteracy are both encouraging and disappointing. Some valuable efforts have been made at the national level, involving programmes of varying duration and scope, but there has been no world-wide effort commensurate with the extent of the scourge. Without wishing to minimize the progress made, we must recognize that the situation as a whole is far from satisfactory when we consider the means available to mankind and all that remains to be done before access to *education for all* becomes effective.

There was a notable increase in the enrolment of children in school during the 1960s and this upsurge gathered momentum during the following decade and in the early 1980s, particularly in the developing countries. Enrolment at primary level – which rose throughout the world as a whole from 340 million in 1960 to 578 million in 1985, i.e. an increase of almost 70 per cent – more than doubled during the period concerned in the developing countries where the figures rose from 216 million to 473 million.

The second half of the twentieth century has likewise seen a marked increase in the number of literate adults aged 15 and over throughout the world, the total having risen from 1,708 million in 1975 to 2,314 million in 1985, i.e. an increase of roughly 35 per cent in ten years. In the 25 years from 1960 to 1985, moreover, the rate of illiteracy among adults, estimated at 39.3 per cent at the beginning of that period, was reduced to 27.7 per cent. This positive evolution, however, is due to the expanded enrolment of children in school rather than to any progress in the struggle against adult illiteracy.

In spite of the foregoing, illiteracy still persists and is even growing to a disturbing degree since, notwithstanding the decline in the illiteracy rate world-wide, the absolute number of illiterate adults is steadily increasing, the figures having risen from 740 million in 1970 to 889 million in 1985. In global terms, therefore, it would seem that progress in schooling is offset by the effects of population growth.

The average illiteracy rate in the world conceals disparities – frequently very pronounced disparities – between different regions of the world, between countries in the same region and, within a given country, between rural and urban areas. It should be noted that 98 per cent of the 889 million adult illiterates aged 15 and over are to be found in the Third World where the average illiteracy rate is 38.2 per cent, rising to 67.6 per cent in the case of the least developed countries.

ILLITERACY AND POVERTY

Illiteracy is often due to the marginalization of a significant section of the population, those human beings who are, at once, the poorest, the least well fed and the least well cared for and whose ignorance hinders their personal development as well as their participation in the tasks and benefits inherent in the development of their societies.

It goes without saying that the eradication of illiteracy does not automatically remove poverty, but by eliminating a brake on development it does indirectly favour improvements in living and working conditions.

Similarly, the acquisition of literacy does not guarantee access to employment, especially in the often difficult economic circumstances currently prevailing. On the other hand, there is no doubt that illiteracy does

seriously impede the entry – or re-entry – of young people seeking employment or of unemployed workers, especially at the present time when technological changes imply continual occupational reconversions. Evolution in the technological field, moreover, requires that everyone should possess solid basic skills and knowledge and be able to adapt them to new situations.

Majid couldn't get a job at the tailor's shop in the village market. He cannot read and write measurements required for customers. He is unhappy ....

(From the diary of an instructor, United Republic of Tanzania)

* * *

For more than a year now, they've refused to register me as looking for work. 'It's pointless for you', they tell me, 'since you can't read.' But I've got four kids to feed ....

(Mr. L., 37, lives near London, United Kingdom)

There is little likelihood that people struggling for everyday survival will be genuinely determined to learn to read and write. What would impel them to devote time and energy to the tremendous effort needed to acquire the ability to write? In order to learn how to read and write, individuals must be strongly motivated and such will only be the case when they hope to derive advantages therefrom and feel that they will be able to improve their living conditions.

The struggle for literacy is therefore simultaneously a struggle for justice, for a greater degree of equality, for the individual's aspiration to play an economic, social and political role in society and for recognition of the right of all to benefit from development. It is this that makes the struggle against illiteracy so difficult and it is for the same reason that there is a greater chance of

success if the quest for literacy is part of a dynamic process of change, in a society which is itself changing. Conversely, in a society characterized by profound socio-economic inequalities and rigid social structures, there may well be an absence of the conditions and motivations required for a vigorous effort designed to eradicate or substantially reduce illiteracy. Literacy is a political act having its roots in socio-economic realities.

DECLARATION OF PERSEPOLIS

... The International Symposium for Literacy, meeting in Persepolis from 3–8 September 1975, ... considered literacy to be not just the process of learning the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, but a contribution to the liberation of man and to his full development.

Thus conceived, literacy creates the conditions for the acquisition of a critical consciousness of the contradictions of society in which man lives and of its aims...

Literacy is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental right...

Literacy, like education in general, is not the driving force of historical change. It is not the only means of liberation but it is an essential instrument for all social change...

LITERACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that 'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration'. How can this be achieved when the means are lacking both to recognize and to defend those rights? And access to written messages is primordial among those means.

> ... **Considering** *that illiterate adults are defenceless in a society whose working they cannot understand, into which they have no means of entering and in which they are unable effectively to exercise or to defend their rights as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration,...*
>
> **Invites** ...
>
> *(c) The General Assembly of the United Nations to draw the attention of organs having responsibilities in the area of human rights to the importance of combating illiteracy as a means of ensuring the effective enjoyment of rights possessed by every human being;*
>
> *(d) The United Nations and its Specialized Agencies, especially Unesco, to do their utmost to increase the contribution which literacy can make in the contemporary world to the safeguarding of peace, economic and social development, the emancipation of peoples and the promotion of rights and freedoms...*
>
> (Extracts from a Resolution adopted by the Second Committee of the *International Conference of Human Rights*, organized by United Nations in Tehran, April/May 1968)

Hence, illiteracy is seen to be an obstacle to the achievement of the principle of equality among men since it not only represents a violation of the individuals's right to education but is also one of the main difficulties confronting the effective exercise of other human rights. Illiteracy is not only a breach of human dignity; it is also a factor undermining democracy and one of the primary causes of social exclusion.

The problem of illiteracy, in fact, must be seen first and foremost in terms of *inequalities*: between individuals, between specific groups or categories of the population, between clearly defined areas within a given country and between countries themselves. These persistent inequalities and the resultant frustrations engender tensions which in turn underlie conflicts, the more so in that unequal access to knowledge goes hand-in-hand with unequal access to well-being. Illiterates are therefore outcasts socially, economically and politically. They are 'marginalized' because they cannot read; and they cannot learn to read because they are rejected. By the same dialectic, illiteracy is both a cause and a consequence of poverty.

This inequality of access to knowledge, like the unequal distribution of wealth, is all the more disheartening, not to say appalling, in that the progress made in modern science and technology and the resulting social and economic improvements have only served to widen the gulf which divides the privileged and the non-privileged. The enormous advance in the communications media, which has reduced the dimensions of our world, has made the inequalities existing between States and within States more flagrant and more intolerable.

What is the use of asserting that all men 'are entitled without distinction to equal protection under law', if the illiterate is incapable of using that protection in the same way as an educated person? The illiterate cannot be aware of the texts and documents so widely used in administrative and legal procedures today; he cannot understand to the full such accusations as may be levelled against him or such questions as may be put to him; nor can he verify the accuracy and impartiality with which his replies are recorded. In these circumstances, he must rely wholly on third parties to ensure his defence with no possibility of checking on their

efficacy, even though his life and liberty made be at stake.

It is meaningless to guarantee the freedom to choose the people's representatives and to declare that the will

WHY SHOULD WE BECOME LITERATE?

... We agree to join the classes
if you teach us how not to depend on others any more
... Can literacy help us live a little better?
Starve a little less?
... Would it help us know how to raise our yield,
and increase our income?
And from where could we borrow money on easy terms,
and what benefits would we get from the co-operatives?
... Will the programme teach us how to take care of our health, and become strong?
If it does, then we shall all come.
They say that there are laws to protect and benefit us.
... Would literacy help us to know these laws?
Would we know the laws that have changed the status of women?
And the laws that protect the tribals among us?
We want a straight answer...

(Prose poem composed by a group of poor and illiterate people in the State of West Bengal, India, who were following an adult education programme ten years ago.)

Source: Moitra, S., *Adult education and development* (Bonn), No. 31, September 1988, p. 115-117.

of the people must be expressed through 'universal and equal suffrage' in a world where the legislation of certain countries still preserves distinctions between the literate and the illiterate, and where millions of men and women cannot exercise their right to vote with a full understanding of the realities involved because they can neither read nor write. Even if literacy does not necessarily ensure an increased participation in political institutions, it does at least provide the individual with the means for such participation. Even

> *... Literacy work, like education in general, is a political act. It is not neutral, for the act of revealing social reality in order to transform it, or of concealing it in order to preserve it, is political...* (Declaration of Persepolis)

when illiterates take part in the political activities of their community, it has become more and more difficult for them to hold positions of responsibility within the institutions concerned. Beyond the local level, moreover, participation in political institutions is virtually impossible for illiterates. Literacy does not of itself create a just and egalitarian society, but it does, at least, provide the means for participation. In brief, effective participation in democracy requires knowledge of written texts which alone can provide the information and facts needed to illuminate the issues of debate.

Giving an individual or social group access to reading and writing means giving them the possibility of political expression and the basic instruments required for their participation in decisions affecting their existence and their future. Literacy is an essential pre-condition for the effective exercise of most of the rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. An illiterate may know nothing of the law which is supposed to protect him just as he is unaware of the guarantees set out in the Universal Declaration concerning, for example, marriage, employment, and participation and verification with respect to the management of public affairs. In this connection, incidentally, it must be stressed that to be 'literate' certainly means being able to read but also means being able to understand what is read. The individual who reads without understanding is still illiterate.

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With literacy, the individual acquires an undoubted social advancement. Literacy produces a categorical change: once literate, an individual ceases to belong to the illiterate category and enters that of the educated members of the community. His capacity is recognized and marked by social elevation. Literacy frees the individual from a sense of inferiority and from feelings of dependence and subservience. At the same time, it endows those groups which are under-privileged in respect of their social conditions and the exercise of power (more especially, minority groups and women) with a broader autonomy and greater influence.

SOME TESTIMONIES

... I once was blind, but now can see ...

(A blind farmer from Malawi, upon becoming literate in braille)

No longer do I have to ask my son to read letters to me...
Using the telephone is now no problem: I can read the numbers.
... When I draw my salary I sign my name proudly with the others...

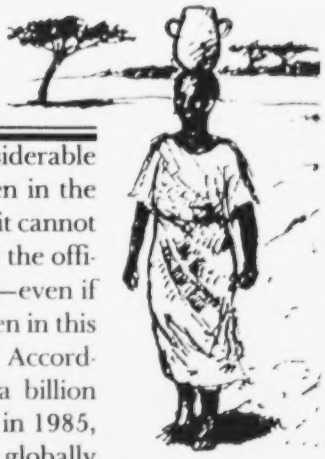
(Testimonies from the National Literacy Campaign in Ethiopia)

... Uncle Sukhon, for instance, has paid twenty-five rupees to about five scribes to fill in forms to get a loan from the bank. He cannot write...

(From the diary of an instructor, United Republic of Tanzania)

In all societies, the right to work and the free choice of occupation are increasingly conditioned by the ability to read and write. It is a platitude that those who can neither read nor write are restricted to occupations requiring a minimum of qualifications and offering the fewest chances of promotion, and the greatest exposure to risks and hazards. On economic recession, it is the least educated elements in the population who are the first to suffer unemployment. The ability to read and write will become increasingly necessary in order to find employment and succeed in the world of work.

WOMEN: THE DOUBLY UNDER-PRIVILEGED



Progress has been made, sometimes to a considerable extent, regarding equality of men and women in the field of education. In actual practice, however, it cannot be denied that the normative instruments and the official declarations have not eliminated the gap—even if it has been reduced—between men and women in this respect. If proof be required, the figures exist. According to Unesco estimations, more than half a billion adult women aged 15 and over were illiterate in 1985, i.e. almost 63 per cent of all illiterates. While globally the rate of female illiteracy in the world in 1985 was 34.9 per cent (as against 20.5 per cent for men), the figure for the developing countries was 48.9 per cent. For the least developed countries, it was 78.4 per cent and in 14 countries – 10 in Africa and 4 in Asia – exceeded 80 per cent. Additionally, of the 116 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 who were unable to attend elementary school in 1985, 60 per cent were girls, the women and mothers of tomorrow whose role and influence in every aspect of existence will be decisive.

The very idea of sending a girl to school was formerly considered immoral in our society... A girl was supposed to stay at home until the day of marriage... Every day she would have to go to the river to fetch water, collect wood for the fire and prepare the food; she looked after the cattle and household, and that was how she would live for the rest of her life... In six months I was able to read and write. I have become aware of things. It is like being reborn or like a blind man who has regained his sight... (Birke, aged 27, from Sidamo, Ethiopia)

Source: *Communication media and education for development. The case of Ethiopia*, by Fikre Marian Tsehai.

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The priority given to women's literacy is justified not only by the seriousness and extent of the situation in which they are placed with respect to education but also by recognition of the responsibilities they assume for the survival and well-being of their children and the key role they play in transmitting the heritage of their culture to younger generations. It has been said that 'to educate a mother is to educate an entire family' and, if this is true, it is equally true that where the mother's education is insufficient that of the children suffers accordingly. The non-enrolment of girls in school is even more serious since it not only compromises their future situation in society by reason of their illiteracy but also the future of that society itself. As the Algerian reformer, Ibn Badis, observed, 'Educate a boy and you educate one person. Educate a girl and you educate a nation'.

Taken from Thellin, *Pilot project on international education for adults - Sweden*. Paris, Unesco, 1988.

CONCLUSION: DISARM FOR LITERACY, BECOME LITERATE FOR PEACE

Peace can only be based on equality and understanding among individuals and peoples. There can be therefore neither peace nor stability in the world so long as hundreds of millions of men and women are kept in ignorance and want.

It is evident that making the largest possible number of individuals literate represents an undoubted contribution to peace and understanding. Conversely, a process making for peace could contribute to eradicating illiteracy among the under-privileged by enabling the vast sums now spent on armaments and preparation for war to be used for education and development. What could be achieved if the international community would decide to use part of the resources at present invested in means of destruction for the education and the advancement of humanity?

- *The arms race creates a huge burden on national economies and on societies' resources.*
- *Military expenditure in the developing countries represents three times the amount spent on public health and one-third more than the sum spent on public education.*
- *The developed countries devote twenty times as much to the military sector as to aid to the Third World.*
- *US $900,000 million: this was the amount of military expenditure throughout the world in 1986 (as against US $355,700 million in 1976).*
- *US $1,190,000 million: this was the total of the developing countries' foreign debt in 1987 (as against US $98,000 million in 1973).*

International Literacy Year, 1990, is intended to alert us to the persistence of illiteracy, one of the major global challenges of our era, and of the urgent need for the international community to combat it by offering its support and solidarity to the nations most severely afflicted. The challenge of illiteracy can only be met by concerted action on the part of all those concerned, assembling their forces and acting together to conquer ignorance, eliminate poverty, promote peace and assert the solidarity and interdependence of nations and peoples.

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Mr Hamadache entered Unesco in 1971 and then worked in Asia and Africa before moving to Unesco headquarters where he has been a specialist in the Division of Literacy and Primary Education.

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